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Will U.S. Retaliate for Moscow Microwaves?

By William Beecher
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The Ford administration, pessimistic over the prospects of talking the Russians into halting their microwave bombardment of the American Embassy in Moscow, is considering retaliation in kind against Soviet installations in the United States. Senior officials say an interdepartmental task force is looking into technical, legal and other implications of such things as beaming microwaves, infrared rays against the Soviet embassy here or against other Russian facilities where communications intercepts are known to be carried out.

The likelihood that retaliation will be attempted is not high, the officials conceded. But they said serious exploration of nasty options is being pursued because of concerns about a Russian effort in Moscow.

Soviet microwaves, though substantially reduced in recent months, are interfering with American electronic eavesdropping in Moscow and causing morale problems among

embassy employees apprehensive about potential health hazards.

BUT THE ADMINISTRATION has chosen, thus far at least, not to make a public cause celebre over the matter.

In part, officials say, this is to avoid inserting the issue into the presidential campaign where Jimmy Carter might use it to buttress his charge that the Russians are taking advantage of the United States by making detente a one-way street.

Perhaps more importantly, the administration seeks to avoid a detailed public airing of the highly sensitive and esoteric means by which the United States and the Soviet Union intercept important conversations within one another's borders and elsewhere around the world.

Among the retaliatory options considered, sources said, would be to use a 15-foot cathode ray tube positioned across the street from the Soviet Embassy here to wreak havoc with its electronic systems. Another would be to beam in infrared rays which would be more in the way of a harassing technique, because they

would render hot to the touch a desk, file cabinet or instrument that was their target.

OFFICIALS ADMITTED there would be many problems associated with any such move. Since the United States has objected to the Russians potentially jeopardizing the health of American personnel with microwaves, this country would not be on strong moral grounds to do the same.

Then, too, there could be complaints from irate citizens in the neighborhood of the embassy if their TV reception was affected, or even lawsuits claiming injury.

There is also the question of counter-retaliation by the Russians, in Moscow or elsewhere.

Sources say there have been a total of four separate microwave beam sources aimed at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow starting in the late 1950s.

In the 1960s and 1970s additional beams were added. Really serious concern developed in mid-1975 when the level of microwaves was stepped up significantly, to about 18 microwatts per square centimeter, well above the Soviet safe level for industrial exposure, but well below the U.S. level.

PROTESTS WERE lodged with the Russians about health hazards and President Ford sent a personal appeal to Leonid Brezhnev to stop the practice. Deterioration in the health of former American Ambassador Walter Stoessel, whose desk was one of the hottest spots in the embassy, was one of the factors behind the protest. Stoessel has recently been transferred to West Germany.

Special aluminum screens were installed on the upper floors of the embassy and they reportedly are effective in blocking out about 90 percent of incoming microwaves.

The Soviets have recently increased the overall microwave level, but they have switched to a more selective focusing of highly directional beams at those offices on the top floors which they believe house electronic eavesdropping equipment. The hours of coverage appear to have been reduced, too, sources say, with the Russians now concentrating the beams during office hours.